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SUBJECT: MACEDONIAN ELECTIONS: GRUEVSKI IN NEAR-COMPLETE  
CONTROL

REF: SKOPJE 146

SUMMARY

1. (SBU) In a second round of presidential and municipal elections assessed as generally meeting international standards, ruling VMRO-DPMNE,s Gjorge Ivanov won by almost a two-to-one margin over SDSM opponent Ljubomir Frckoski. Macedonia,s ethnic Albanian population essentially boycotted the presidential race, which barely (and perhaps suspiciously) met the 40% turnout requirement. VMRO also took 55 mayoral seats plus the Skopje mayor,s office, a huge increase over the 21 mayoral seats the party won in the last municipal elections. Opposition SDSM took only seven mayoral seats, and is putting all its hopes for the resurrection of the party in outgoing President Branko Crvenkovski, expected to take back the party helm after he leaves office. The largest e-Albanian party, DUI, lost the key municipalities of Tetovo, Gostivar, and -- apparently -- Aracinovo; e-Albanian politics here are now even more fragmented and complex. Appeals and fallout from the heavy snow just prior to the March 21 first round will mean yet one more round in some mayoral races on April 19. End summary.

Elections Generally Met International Standards, But Problems Remain

2. (SBU) OSCE/ODIHR,s observer mission assessed the second round of elections as meeting "most OSCE and Council of Europe commitments and standards for democratic elections" and noted improvements from the first round to the second in administration of the voting and counting, and in reduction of family and proxy voting. Following ODIHR,s first- round assessment that family and proxy voting had increased over June 2008, the State Electoral Commission (SEC) -- on the international community,s urging -- issued explicit instructions to Local Electoral Boards (LEBs) emphasizing their responsibility to prevent family/proxy voting while allowing and logging acceptable types of voter assistance (to the illiterate or disabled). ODIHR and Embassy teams saw a substantial reduction in family/proxy voting in the second round, and an overall increase in LEBs, focus on procedural details, including logging the names of election monitors.

3. (SBU) While citing some improvements between rounds, ODIHR,s assessment also noted increased reports of pressure and intimidation of voters by public administration officials and party activists -- chiefly on behalf of VMRO -- ahead of the second round, noting that these reports "continued to cloud the generally positive assessment of the election observation mission." The observer mission also cited the sluggish response of the SEC to parties, appeals in the first round (reftel) as problematic.

14. (SBU) As expected, PM Gruevski,s hand-picked candidate, Gjorge Ivanov won handily over SDSM,s Ljubomir Frckoski, getting more than 451,000 votes to Frckoski,s approximately 263,000. With a suspicious late-day surge in voting, the 40% voter turnout threshold was met, with just over 42% of registered voters casting ballots in the presidential campaign. Nearly 45,000 voters cast invalid ballots, either choosing neither candidate or writing in their own choices (with quite a few choosing Chuck Norris), with the highest rates of invalid ballots in ethnic Albanian areas; without these ballots the 40% threshold would not have been met. Turnout for the presidential vote in ethnic Albanian areas was about 14% nationwide, with some areas seeing turnout below 1%.

15. (SBU) Ambassador Reeker met briefly with President-elect Ivanov April 7 to congratulate him on his victory, highlighting the need for Ivanov to reach out to the e-Albanian community. Additionally, the Ambassador suggested that the President-elect use the transition period (Ivanov will take office on May 12) to reach out across political lines following this highly partisan campaign to demonstrate that he will be a President to all citizens of Macedonia. Ivanov had little of substance to offer, but noted that he intended to invite the heads of state of all neighboring countries to participate in the inaugural festivities (note: a formal inauguration is not traditional in Macedonia), and will determine the scale of the event based on RSVPs. Ivanov said he is also considering hosting an inter-religious prayer meeting as part of his inauguration at the newly-erected

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Mother Theresa memorial home.

What Opposition?

16. (SBU) VRMO-DPMNE,s victory in these elections was crushing. In addition to Ivanov,s two to one win over Frckoski in the Presidential elections, VMRO won mayoral races in 55 municipalities plus Skopje, making huge gains over the 2005 municipal elections, where VMRO took only 21 mayoral seats. SDSM and SDSM-backed candidates won only seven municipalities versus the 36 it won in 2005. Most of the mayoral races were much closer than the presidential race, and in many municipalities VMRO won by narrow margins to take mayoral seats where there has never been a non-SDSM mayor, including Gevgelija and Berovo. SDSM can only claim one of Skopje,s ten municipalities, Karposh (which was actually won by a candidate from SDSM-partner LDP).

17. (SBU) SDSM,s now awaits President Branko Crvenkovski,s relinquishing of office (May 12) and return to formal leadership of the party. Interim SDSM President Zoran Zaev told us ahead of elections that he would consider mayoral wins in 20 municipalities a major victory, perhaps sufficient for him to take on Crvenkovski for the party helm. With only seven wins, including his own in Strumica, Zaev is likely to simply pass the torch back to Crvenkovski, who has a tough road ahead of him to rebuild a party in shambles.

Elections Leave Ethnic-Albanian Political Future Murky

18. (SBU) Although DUI mayors won in 12 of Macedonia,s 16 predominately e-Albanian municipalities (down from 13 in 2005 municipal elections) and DUI seems to have stayed a bid by e-Macedonian Muslim/Torbeshi candidate Fiat Canoski to shift the ethnic power balance in the volatile, lakeside municipality of Struga, DUI is disappointed with its performance in these elections. DUI lost control of two of Macedonia,s most important e-Albanian municipalities, Tetovo and Gostivar, and has apparently lost a close race to New

Democracy (ND) in Arachinovo, a suburb of Skopje that has long been a National Liberation Army (NLA), and thus DUI, stronghold. While VMRO all but wiped out its opposition in these elections, its coalition partner is now faced with more opposition than before. DPA,s candidate Sadi Bexheti won in his party,s "must-win" race, Tetovo, giving wavering DPA only one mayoral seat, but in the most important ethnic Albanian city in Macedonia. Independent candidate Rupi Osmani,s landslide victory in Gostivar almost certainly means the formation of yet another new e-Albanian party, and given Osmani,s history and his base the party will likely be very vocal and hyper-critical of DUI.

¶9. (SBU) Aside from Imer Selmani,s impressive performance in the first round presidential elections, ND,s results in its first elections were disappointing. Should ND,s narrow victory in Aracinovo be confirmed, the party can walk away from these elections with modest credibility and be able to continue its growth. Ultimately these elections show deep ferment and continuing division in the e-Albanian political scene. DUI remains in power, but that power is faltering as its achievements in the coalition have come under harsher criticism. With Tetovo, DPA survives and Menduh Thaci will undoubtedly continue to be a thorn in DUI,s side. ND and Osmani,s future party will further fragment the picture with presumably contrasting ideologies and followings substantial enough to be relevant but too modest to make a significant impact.

#### Municipal Round Three

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¶10. (SBU) Five municipalities will certainly have a third round of elections, as polling stations in municipalities that were closed due to the snow or annulment of voting in the first round had their first round of municipal election on April 5, and the municipalities will likely hold the second round of their mayoral races on April 19 -- Orthodox Easter. The SEC is now reviewing appeals of results in polling stations in other municipalities and will make decisions late this week or early next week on where there may be re-runs of second round municipal elections. Many victory margins were razor thin, and so annulments of results based on irregularities could result in re-runs in a number of key races, including Ohrid, Veles, Struga, Tetovo, Aracinovo as well as a number of smaller municipalities. ODIHR,s observer mission plans to monitor the appeals process through this week, but not to send monitors for a

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third round.

Comment: Gruevski In Charge

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¶11. (SBU) These elections leave Gruevski and VMRO in almost complete control of the country and with the largest e-Albanian party weaker. Yet Gruevski carries this mandate toward an uncertain future. Macedonia,s economy, already weak, could turn sharply downward in the coming months. The name issue remains unsolved, and with it Euro-Atlantic integration is stalled. Gruevski,s response to nearly every issue is to take whatever course would further consolidate his own power against an already defeated opposition. Now the excuses have run out and it is time to engage on a constructive way forward.

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